

Bend Up Close: Bob Speik - 78 Years Old, Still Climbing

by K_Guice

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Climbing a mountain in the Cascades, most would not expect to be side-by-side with an 80-year-old man. However, if Robert Speik gets his birthday wish, someone will do just that.

Currently 78, the Bend mountaineer is already making plans on how he will climb North Sisters and Mount Jefferson. "I don't know that anyone has climbed them at that age," Speik said. "I bet you, I might be the oldest."

All Photos courtesy of Bob Speik, TraditionalMountaineering.org

Neither age, nor conventional wisdom has ever gotten in the way of Speik's goals. The former successful mortgage banker didn't start taking a serious interest in athletics until his early 40s.

The Pomona College graduate says he was moderately athletic in college, where he met his wife Margaret, known as Tommie to her family and friends. He says he was also athletic in the military where he served as first lieutenant.

However, it wasn't until Speik read a book called *Aerobics* by Kenneth Cooper, a Major in the United States Air Force, that he felt truly inspired to get fit.

It had nothing to do with aerobics classes. Speik says it was about recognizing the health benefits of aerobic exercise, which gets your heart rate up and keeps it there for a period of time.

"It changed everyone's life about that time," Speik said. "Kenneth Copper sparked a new way of life." The results could be seen around San Diego County, where Speik lived at the time. "We had a marathon with 100 people. The next year, they had over a thousand. The next year, over 5,000. And the next, 20,000," he said.

This new-found passion changed the way he felt. "Exercises like that change your body chemistry and the way you feel about life," he said. So, it is no surprise that Speik became a long-distance runner. "I did that for 14 years," he said.

From there he took an interest in mountain climbing. "Good health resulted in me getting interested in that," he said. Speik joined the Sierra Club. Since that time, he has summited over 300 peaks. He didn't realize it at the time, but that passion would later become a way of life.

In the meantime, Speik enjoyed a 25 year run at Coldwell Bankers. From there he became a fraud investigator for the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) and Resolution Trust Corporation (RTC).

During a summer break in between jobs, Speik and his wife decided to do something they had dreamed of since college. "We toured Europe in our VW bus for a whole summer," he said. The couple, along with their three children Frederick, Sarah and Katherine, camped for three months throughout the region.

In his 50s, Speik moved to Newport Beach, where he found a new interest. "We took off in sailboat racing." He developed a great love for the sport.

While he and his wife enjoyed Newport, when he retired at 60, they decided to sell their home and travel the country in their motor home. "I think it was an alternative to cruising the world in a yacht, which I always wanted to do," he said.

“We didn’t travel very long,” Speik laughed. The couple and their dog soon found themselves in Bend. They liked it so much they decided to stay. “Bend put an end to our voyage.” He joked.

“We liked Bend because of the small town atmosphere at the foot of major mountain peaks and the myriad of athletic opportunities for hiking and biking, etc.,” he said. “I saw these mountains and said, ‘Gee, I need to climb those.’”

It was here, that a whole new journey began for Speik. “I went to COCC (Central Oregon Community College) and I said, ‘do you have in classes in basic mountaineering.’” They asked what it was and I said, “I’d teach it,” he said.

“I ended up teaching many courses; mountaineering, light and fast back packing, map and compass and later GPS (global positioning system),” he said. “I did that for six years in the adult-extension division.”

Meanwhile, he also founded a mountaineering club in Bend called the Cascade Mountaineers. “That is prospering today,” he said proudly. “I was the founder. I spend two years as the president and built it up to about 300 families.”

From there, Speik created TraditionalMountaineering.org. The mission of his web site is to provide free information and instruction about basic and advanced mountain climbing, safety skills, gear, off-trail hiking, light and fast backpacking techniques, as illustrated through shared mountaineering adventures.

Traditional Mountaineering provides free seminars, hikes, backpacking and peak climbs in the Three Sisters Wilderness. Speik also organizes community service outings.

He says more people need to get educated before they head up the mountain. That is why he created the site. "My purpose is to teach people the skills to avoid the risks of some of these peaks," he said.

Recent news stories highlight the potential dangers that people can encounter when they're not prepared. For example, the group of teens traveling with an adventure camp that got lost heading to a camp out at Todd Lake on July 6. "They did not have the essentials," he said. "They didn't have a GPS and appear not to have had a proper map."

Through his site, that is filled with tips, tools and techniques, and his mountaineering courses he hopes to educate and help keep more people safe.

“It’s heart breaking to see these kids who ski out of bounds and they don’t know where they are when they find them and bring them out, they end up losing both feet. It’s just heartbreaking,” he said.

He says with a little knowledge, tragedy can be avoided. “I have a class coming up, which is a basic called mountaineering technique skill at the Central Oregon Environmental Center on Saturday, August 5th,” he said. The class is \$35.

Looking towards the future, Speik says he will continue to climb and continue to reach out to others in an effort of educating the general public. In addition, he says, “I’m still very much intrigued by the website. I do everything with it, including write the code,” Speik added.

He is interested in adding to it and continuing to upgrade the site. “I am also going to write a guide book about traditional mountaineering,” he said.

At 78, Speik has no intentions of slowing down. He says no one should. "It's never too late to get active," he advises. "You can start by walking five days a week and then throw in a little jogging," he added. "Pretty soon you'll raise your eyes up the hill and up you'll want to go."

Bend Weekly Newslink: www.TraditionalMountaineering.org

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